

Extract from a Letter to A.O.

You write: "Even some primitive people from Mexico join the values of modern society (because of TV). What could make them go back to the forest?"

What could "make them go back to the forest" would be an end to the functioning of the world's industrial centers. The Mexican Indians couldn't use their TV sets if the TV stations were no longer broadcasting. They couldn't use motor vehicles or any internal combustion engines if the refineries were no longer producing fuel. They couldn't use any electrical appliances if the electrical power-plants were no longer producing electricity. Or, even if the Indians relied on small, local, water-powered generators, these would become useless when parts of the generators or of the appliances wore out and could not be replaced with new parts produced in factories. For example, could a group of Mexican Indians make a light bulb? I think it would be impossible, but even if it were possible it would be so difficult that it would not be worth the trouble. Thus, if the world's industrial centers stopped functioning, the Mexican Indians would have no choice but to revert to simple, preindustrial methods.

But what could make the TV stations stop broadcasting, the power-plants stop generating electricity, the refineries stop producing fuel, and the factories stop making parts? If the power-plants stopped producing electricity, then the TV stations would no longer be able to broadcast, the refineries would no longer be able to produce fuel, and the factories would no longer be able to make things. If the refineries stopped producing fuel, then the transportation of goods and people would have to cease, and therefore the factories would no longer be able to make things. If the factories were no longer able to make things, then there would be no more replacement parts to keep the TV stations, power-plants, and petroleum refineries functioning. Moreover, every factory needs things produced by other factories in order to keep operating.

Thus, modern industrial society can be compared to a complex organism in which every important part is dependent on every other important part. If any one important part of the system stops functioning, then the whole system stops functioning. Or even if the complex and finely-tuned relationship between the various parts of the system is severely disrupted, the system must stop functioning. Consequently, like any other highly complex organism, the modern industrial system is much easier to kill than a simple organism.^[1] Compare a human being with an earthworm: You can cut an earthworm into many pieces, and each piece will grow into a whole new worm. But a human being can be killed by a blow to the head, a stab to the heart or the kidney, the cutting of a major artery—even a psychological condition such as severe depression can kill a human being. Like a human being, the industrial system is vulnerable because of its complexity and the interdependence of its parts. And the more the system comes to resemble a single, highly organized worldwide entity, the more vulnerable it becomes.

Thus, to your question about what could make Mexican Indians give up modernity, the answer is: the death of the industrial system. Is it possible for revolutionary action to kill the industrial system? Of course, I can't answer that question with any certainty, but I think it may be possible to kill the industrial system. I suggest that the movement that led to the Russian Revolution of 1917, and the Bolsheviks in particular, could provide a model for action today. I don't mean that anyone should look at the Bolsheviks and say, "The Bolsheviks did such-and-such and so-and-so, therefore we should do the same." What I do mean is that the Russian example shows what a revolutionary movement might be able to accomplish today.

Throughout its history up to 1917, the Bolshevik party remained small in relation to the size of Russia. Yet when the time of crisis arrived the Bolsheviks were able to assume control of the country, and they were able to inspire millions of Russians to heroic efforts that enabled them against all odds to triumph over enormous difficulties.

Of course, the Russian Revolution is accounted a failure because the ideal socialist society of which the Bolsheviks dreamed never materialized. Revolutions never succeed in creating the new social order of which the

revolutionaries dream. But destruction is usually easier than construction, and revolutions often do succeed in destroying the old social order against which they are directed. If revolutionaries today were to abandon all illusions about the possibility of creating a new and better society and take as their goal merely the death of the industrial system, they might well succeed in reaching that goal. •

ENDNOTE

^[1] I don't mean to say that modern industrial society is literally an organism in the same sense in which an earthworm or a human being is an organism. But the analogy with an organism is instructive for some purposes.